Mr. Average American has 2d thoughts

By Delia Pitts

Last fall the "Average American" handed President Nixon a landslide victory over Democratic candidate George McGovern. Now, if he had it to do over again, the Average American might take it all back.

That's not the opinion of the pollsters, the politicians or pundit Theodore H. White, but of Mr. Average American himself, Richard Johnson of suburban Rolling Meadows.

Johnson, 44, was selected last year by national public television to represent the country's millions of middle-income voters. He was dubbed Mr. Average American in two television programs in which he expressed his views on the 1972 presidential campaign.

In December, 1971, researchers for the Public Broadcasting System (educational TV) began searching for a voter to represent the views of the "Average American."

The researchers, led by commentator Robert MacNeil and producer Robert Lissit, selected Rollings Meadows as a typical middle-class community and interviewed 12 families in the suburb. The Johnson family was chosen and became the subject of two PBS programs in February and September, 1972.

Though John said he was a lifelong Democrat, he broke with that pattern, as did millions of others, to vote for President Nixon. This, despite a five-day cross-country tour with Sen. McGovern during which he was able to talk to the candidate and observe his campaign closely.

Johnson, interviewed in his office at the National Steel Service Center in Evanston, where he is credit manager, said, "I wouldn't have voted for anybody if I'd known about this Watergate fiasco then."

References to truth and belief punctuate Johnson's sentences. He describes himself as a man "from a religious background" who is proud to be a Chicagoan ("I'd stand up to anybody in the world for Chicago.") and an American ("I thank God I had the opportunity to be born here").

But thinking over the break-in at Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate on June 17, 1972, by operatives for the Committee for the Re-election of the President and the subsequent cover-up conducted by committee and administration officials, Johnson is convinced President Nixon knew of some of those events.

"I can't believe in my mind that a man that is called President was not aware of this," he said.

Johnson, rephrasing his disbelief as if attempting to grapple with the enormity of its consequences, then said, "Its beyond my farthest dreams that he knew nothing, I can't believe he didn't know anything."

Pursuing this thought, Johnson mused: "If Nixon knew about it, doggone it, why did he allow something like that to happen? The Democrats had nobody, as the results turned out in the election. How could he let these things happen?" He added wistfully, "So unnecessary, so unnecessary."

Johnson pinpointed what may become the President's greatest problem in the coming months as he presents his Watergate position: deepening public cynicism. As Johnson put it: "How much of the truth will we be able to believe?"

He explained, "Nixon could be telling 100 per cent truth and they still wouldn't believe him." Would Johnson? "I don't know."

Johnson said before his television experience he used to be a man who picked up the newspaper and "whipped to the sports page," but now he has followed the Senate Watergate hearings since their beginning and is enthusiastic. "Long but very enjoyable," he said in describing them.

The investigating senators are not out to harass the President, Johnson said, but are "really making an honest effort to get the truth."

Johnson thinks the President should allow the Watergate committee to listen to tape recordings Mr. Nixon made of conversations in his White House office to determine if they contain evidence relevant to the Watergate investigation.

But the committee should listen in closed session to avoid releasing any information pertaining to national security, Johnson said.

Johnson is sure the tapes will reveal something of consequence to the investigation, "otherwise I don't know why Nixon would keep them."

Might the end of the Watergate scandal be impeachment? The thought stifles Johnson's

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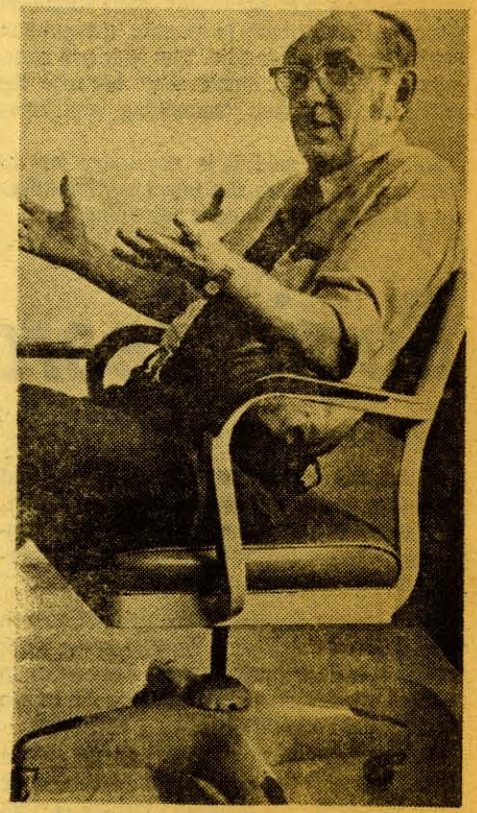

Richard (Mr. Average American) Johnson in his Evanston office: "I wouldn't have voted for anybody if I'd known about this fiasco then." (Sun-Times Photo)

Average American's 2d thoughts

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customary talkativeness. He has little to say: "Impeachment is not the answer. Nixon might resign voluntarily, which I doubt very much. But who would take over if they're trying to get (Vice President Spiro T.) Agnew. I don't know the solution."

On to the meat-and-potatoes issues — literally meat and potatoes — and Johnson's volubility revives. "I'm eating less and less meat, and I hate fish. I love my beef and my pork, and I'm really hurting now. . . . Prices, everything keeps spiraling up, gosh, I don't know what we're going to do."

He's thinking of his family now: a wife, Mary Ann, who works as a church secretary, four children (the oldest, a boy entering college this fall and the $15,000 a year family income. "I can't save any money, if I can just keep my health, my job, get the kids through college. . . ."

Inflation is the nation's No. 1 problem, according to Johnson, followed by race relations and mass transportation.

He said he wishes the country's leaders would turn their attention from foreign entanglements to dealing with these problems at home.

But there is a bright side to U.S. foreign policy, Johnson said. "Good things have happened with China and Russia. We're getting to understand each other better." But in general, he said, he feels the United States should let other countries "handle their own problems. I wouldn't want to force this country on anybody."

Is Dick Johnson really Mr. Average American? He replied:

"I'm not average to a guy making $4,000 in South Carolina and I'm not average to a guy making $60,000 up in the Prudential Building. But I'm average to the extent of what I've accomplished. I've got the problems everyone else has."

A co-worker enters the office, providing further answer to the question. "So now you're famous," he cracks.

Johnson comes back simply, "Yeah, big deal."